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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0176  
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003475

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/I AND NEA/IR  
NSC STAFF FOR OLLIVANT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/01/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: BASRAH RESIDENTS ANGRY, WORRIED ABOUT IRANIAN  
INFLUENCE

Classified By: Senior Advisor Gordon Gray for reason 1.4 (d).

11. (C) Basrawis blame Iran for the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) violence and intimidation that ended in April following Operation Charge of the Knights, community leaders and security officials told Senior Advisor Gray during a visit October 26-29. With the exception of an Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) representative who encouraged Iranian economic engagement in Basra, the residents we met -- Shi,a and Sunni alike -- dismissed suggestions that Iran had any helpful role to play in the province. They cited animosity dating to the Iran-Iraq war and even, in one case, ancient Persian aspirations of empire. As Basrawis become accustomed to relatively safe streets, they fear the possibility that Iran could undermine the province's fragile stability. They urged increased USG efforts to resist Iranian influence. End summary.

Shi,a suspicions  
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12. (C) Mohammed al-Faraji, representing the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS), channeled historical animosity dating to Cyrus the Great when he said that everything the Iranians do in Iraq is in the interests of the Persian empire. Faraji sought USG support to bolster the role of Arab Shi,a religious authority Qassem al-Taie in an effort to offset the influence of Grand Ayatollah Sistani and other religious leaders he said were susceptible to foreign influence. The Iranians do not want al-Taie to become more popular, he said. He called Iran the biggest terrorist country in the world, a permanent evil on Iraq's borders compared to what he asserted was the only-temporary evil of the United States in Iraq. He claimed that he had declined three recent invitations to visit Iran.

13. (S) Faraji visited the Regional Embassy Office in Basra with Majed as-Sari, a nationalist Shi,a political activist who shares his concern about malign influence from Iran as well as Syria and Saudi Arabia. They said that the Iranian Consulate General in Basra had recently brought a truck full of soccer t-shirts to poor neighborhoods and handed them out to young men, seeking in return participation in upcoming anti-U.S. demonstrations. According to the GOI intelligence liaison in Basra, the "footprints are obvious" regarding Iranian intelligence activities and other non-diplomatic activity by the Iranian Consulate General in Basra.

Soft power?  
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14. (C) Abdel Latheem, head of a local Sunni endowment, told an Embassy officer that 25 prominent Sunni Basrawis including religious figures, businessmen, and civic activists were planning to travel to Iran soon at the invitation of the

Iranian government on a cultural exchange. Latheem rejected the notion that the visit might be a benign effort to build neighborly relations, arguing that the Iranian government wants to use economic and cultural ties to export the Iranian revolution to Basra.

15. (C) Likewise the leadership of the Iraqi Army units that ended JAM militia rule in April see nothing positive in Iranian efforts to strengthen ties with Basra. Major General Hussein Abd' Ali Abdallah, the deputy commander of the Basra Operations Center, claimed that Basrah security forces were succeeding in containing illegal Iranian-sponsored activity. But he also had nothing good to say about legal Iranian activity. Iranian investments are all political, he said; the Iranians believe it is not in their interest for Iraq to be stable. (Note: According to this perspective, Iranian sales of electricity to Iraq are not a mutually beneficial economic transaction but a way for Iran to maintain leverage, forced on Iraq by its current dire needs. End note.) Anxious to reinforce the point, Abdallah's chief of staff -- a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war -- drew poloff aside to emphasize that Iran must be confronted and crushed.

16. (C) Awad al-Abdan, representing the predominantly Sunni National Dialogue Front, was also concerned about Iranian influence, arguing that the SOFA should anticipate the possible necessity of U.S. military action against Iranian interests in Iraq as well as action against al-Qaida and former regime elements in Iraq.

#### Smuggling and Voter Fraud

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17. (S) Basra Governor Mohammed Musbeh Wa'eli, whose Fadilah party broke with other Shi'a parties to stake out a vocal anti-Iranian position, warned of Iranian attempts to undermine the provincial elections scheduled for January. He charged that ISCI is collaborating with Iranian intelligence agents to spread pro-ISCI propaganda and produce false identification cards using the names of Basrawis living in Iran. The false identification cards would allow ISCI supporters to vote twice for ISCI as part of an Iranian-ISCI campaign to control Basra, he said. Wa'eli also accused Ministry of Interior border security official Ahmed al-Khafaji of facilitating Iranian smuggling in collaboration with Hadi al-Amiri, head of the Badr organization and a member of the Iraqi Council of Representatives.

18. (C) British Brigadier Richard Iron, liaison to the Basra Operations Center, said that JAM militants who had fled from Basrah to Iran after Charge of the Knights are quietly slipping back to the city. Crossing by boat at the Shatt al-Arab takes 15 minutes, unhindered by border guards unable to patrol the area or the Iraqi Navy, which does not operate there. Smugglers have constructed ten new concrete jetties on the Iraqi banks to speed off-loading of goods. Further north, smuggling is the principle source of revenue for a community of 5,000 Marsh Arabs who smuggle by "canoe." Iron said the community is not necessarily pro-Iranian and could in fact form Iraq's first line of defense against illegal Iranian activity, if the GOI could find them alternate legitimate sources of revenue.

19. (C) UNAMI representative Jonathan Robinson said that while some other Basrawis also benefit financially from Iranian activities, most are -- like our official contacts -- resentful and distrustful of Iran, blaming Iran for the JAM violence and intimidation. They do not want to jeopardize the recent, if halting, moves toward normality in the city, he said. While much of Basra still needs rebuilding, commercial districts are now open for business, sidewalks fill in the evening with shoppers, street crews are repairing some of the battle-damaged sidewalks, and local

notables are building fine houses downtown.

¶10. (C) Our only invective-free discussion on Iran was with ISCI representative Abdul Hassan al-Rashid. Rashid said that Iranian investment in Iraq could help the Iraqi economy, but he also noted the potential for outside interference from Iraq's neighbors including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.  
Comment  
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¶11. (S) While Iranian-Iraqi commercial and cultural ties are long-standing, Basrawis will not soon forgive Iran for its responsibility for recent militia violence. Thus, many will continue to distrust the activities of the Iranian Consulate General and other Iranians in Basra, with good reason. This resentment toward Iran provides the USG an opportunity for increased security, economic, and political engagement to secure the goodwill of this strategic Iraqi city. End  
comment.  
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